'Instant' and Judicial History

It's been a trying summer for U.S. historians, a couple of them anyway. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. has been roundly condemned for his "indecent exposure" of what John F. Kennedy thought of Secretary of State Rusk (LIFE, July 30). One congressman (Widnall of N.J.) has even proposed legal limits on the use of privileged information gathered by insiders who leave the government to write what Widnall calls "instant history, untempered by time."

But the tempering of time makes no safe harbor for historians either—not if the case of Dr. Sylvester Stevens is any guide. His recent book called *Pennsylvania—Birthplace of a Nation* has caused the daughter of Henry Clay Frick to seek an injunction forbidding its further sale in the state it is about. The book calls her father "stern, brusque, autocratic," attributes to him "a determined effort to destroy union labor" (he broke the famous Homestead Strike of 1892) and claims he cut miners' wages to $1.60 a day. Miss Helen Clay Frick resents and disputes such descriptions of her father. Many previous histories containing them are just hearsay, she argues. And her lawyer claims, "Frick was the exception . . . he did not cut wages, he actually raised them . . . by today's standards he would be regarded as an enlightened man."

Judge Weidner, after excluding the testimony of Stevens' fellow historians, has insisted that the defense produce contemporary evidence, such as newspaper accounts and business records, to establish the historical truth about Frick. Thus, along with judge-made law and judge-made definitions of art and literature (in obscenity and customs cases), we may be in for judge-decreed history as well. *Weidner on Frick*, if the case comes to that, may prove the definitive monograph on the great coal- and steelmaster—or at least the only safe one in Pennsylvania.

There is one obvious solution to both the Schlesinger and the Stevens problems: more writing of history, not less. Schlesinger on Kennedy is just one man's recollection—*his* story, not history. So let others emulate his temerity and, within due limits of ethics and taste, hurry their own versions into print. That will speed the day when the "compound eye" of multiple testimony, which Dean Rusk looks forward to, will give us something closer to the unachievably full truth. This seems to be happening anyway, with Sorensen in *Look*, Evelyn Lincoln in *The Saturday Evening Post* and who knows how many other books to come.

As for Dr. Stevens, his case should spark a fresh burst of historical research into the Robber Barons. Instead of judicial opinion, what the memory of H. C. Frick needs is a monograph by his daughter's lawyer conclusively proving him "an enlightened man," showing up the other historians and throwing fresh light on a period in U.S. history scarcely less crucial than the Kennedy administration. If a lawyer can do that, the historians' guild of which Schlesinger and Stevens are both members will welcome him.

But to suppress a published book! That is a very odd approach to historical truth. It makes Miss Frick a natural enemy of the historians' guild and of civil libertarians. It has already put Judge Weidner to a lot of hard work which historians should be doing instead.

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